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WHAT IS THE SUPERNATURAL?

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What the supernatural is depends on what nature is. And nature is regarded from two widely different points of view. The first of these is shown in Richard Watson Gilder's sonnet:—

THE CELESTIAL PASSION

O white and midnight sky! O starry bath!
 Wash me in thy pure, heavenly, crystal flood;
 Cleanse me, ye stars, from earthly soil and scath;
 Let not one taint remain in spirit or blood!
 Receive my soul, ye burning, awful deeps;
 Touch and baptize me with the mighty power
 That in ye thrills, while the dark planet sleeps;
 Make me all yours for one blest secret hour!
 O glittering host! O high angelic choir!
 Silence each tone that with thy music jars;
 Fill me even as an urn with thy white fire
 Till all I am is kindred to the stars!
 Make me thy child, thou infinite, holy night—
 So shall my days be full of heavenly light!

The second attitude is expressed in Matthew Arnold's

IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

To a Preacher

"In harmony with Nature?" Restless fool,
 Who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,
 When true, the last impossibility—
 To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool!
 Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,
 And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good,
 Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood;
 Nature is stubborn, man would fain adore;
 Nature is fickle, man hath need of rest;
 Nature forgives no debt, and fears no grave;
 Man would be mild, and with safe conscience blest.
 Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
 Nature and man can never be fast friends.
 Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave!

Here are two radically different attitudes toward nature. The one sees in the stars the redeeming power, the cleansing bath. The highest to which man can look is that all he is "be kindred to the stars." According to the other attitude all that is of value in man is that which is above nature. "In that *more* lie all his hopes of good." If man is to live the life of freedom, he must not submit to nature, but overcome her. "Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave."

In the presence of a contradiction so radical we cannot have a mere contradiction, or a mere difference of opinion, of feeling, or of philosophy. Minor differences may be thus explained, but fundamental differences suggest an essential ambiguity. What is it that is meant by "nature" and by that which in Arnold's phrase is "*more*"? Can we get a meaning for the *more*? Can we get any conception of the supernatural that shall be free from ambiguities?

The road is indeed paved with ambiguities. Perhaps no word in common philosophical or theological use is more full of them than the word "nature," and, *ergo*, the word "supernatural." The word "nature" means, for example, the created world. It means the totality of all existence. It means the physical universe as distinct from man. It means essence or character. And the word "supernatural" of course shares these ambiguities. The supernatural may mean that which is above the created order of things. It may mean the spiritual as distinct from the physical. It may mean the miraculous, considered as an event outside the course of nature, produced by divine action. Popularly, it means ghosts. Ecclesiastically, it has been used to mean a sort of hypostasized grace conveyed by the church and sacraments. Here is confusion of every kind. No very cheerful prospect lies before one who would discuss the supernatural. It is like wrestling with Achelous. No sooner have you secured what you think to be a firm hold than the elusive adversary assumes another form. Is not the word an impossible one? To the scientific mind it smacks of offence. It suggests the irrational. The truth that it contains seems to be so imperfectly expressed as to arouse unnecessary opposition. Why not give up the word "supernatural" altogether?

I am not especially interested in the word. But the fact is that words lie largely beyond our control whether for use or dis-use. "When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." But most of us are not so fortunate. We cannot get rid of a word. Others will go on using it. Can we find any consistent meaning for the word "supernatural"? Can we find any common meaning, or at least any common tendency, in its use?

Let us at first drop the word and then come back to it later. This much is evident. In dealing with the facts of the physical world there are two different attitudes in which we can approach them, two different questions which we can ask about them. We can ask the question "Whence?" and we can ask the question "Why?" In other words, we can concerning any event ask the question as to its mechanical or physical cause, that which in modern speech is somewhat loosely called efficient cause, and we can ask the question as to the final cause, or end, or purpose. By efficient cause in this sense is meant the antecedent conditions which lie behind an event and of which it is the outcome. By final cause is meant the purpose which the event is intended to serve. The fire is the efficient cause of the boiling of the kettle. Its final cause is to make the tea.

Now the study of efficient causes taken in this sense is the business of science. Every event that happens in the physical world is the result or expression of antecedent conditions. Science assumes, indeed rests upon, the regularity of sequence between these conditions and the resulting event. It may disclaim the study of cause in any metaphysical sense. It may know nothing theoretically of necessary connection. But cause in the sense of invariable sequence between phenomena is the subject of all science. In this sense, *Scientia est cognoscere causas*. It reduces all phenomena to physical laws, that is to invariable sequence. And it expects with unfailing certitude that, given the same conditions, the result will be invariable. If in any experiment the result varies, then it follows that some unknown factor has intervened, and the attempt is made to find that factor. Science claims rightly the whole field of physical phenomena as lying under invariable law.

I say the whole field of physical phenomena. But it is hard to draw any line. Will science be content to stop there? Should it not try to reduce mental phenomena to a similar uniformity? Through the study of physiological psychology it tries to detect an unvarying relation between brain movements and the facts of consciousness. Our methods of investigation are here extremely imperfect. The complexity of the relation is more fully recognized than it used to be. Few, if any, will now accept the saying that the brain secretes thought as the liver secretes bile. Nevertheless, the belief in uniformity is so strong that we can hardly escape the conclusion that brain movements are concomitant with psychical states. If there could be an exhaustive knowledge of a living human brain, it is at least conceivable that that knowledge would include a knowledge of the thoughts of the man to whom the brain belongs. Such a result would be a new triumph for science. The attempt to reach it is entirely legitimate. We can never say to science, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further." There is no limit to the possible validity of the scientific explanation in its attempt to explain phenomena by antecedent conditions, as the result of efficient causes.

But now there is a great class of facts for which this explanation alone does not suffice. Pick up a book and ask what is its cause. One answer is in terms of the printing-press and the bindery and all the antecedent conditions out of which the book proceeds. Such an account may be exhaustive and inclusive. It may state every physical antecedent which goes to make up the book. Then, having got all this knowledge, we find our answer absolutely incomplete. The book was written for a purpose. It is the expression of intelligence and will. In reading it we are in the presence, not of the printing-press and the bindery, but in that of the mind and will of the author. In order to get any full explanation of the book, we must ask not after its efficient cause alone, but after its final cause, its purpose. We must ask not only, Whence? but Why? To leave this out is to leave out the most important matter. Some one finds a clay brick in Babylonia and brings it to a scientist, who analyzes the clay, and tells just what pressure was needed to give it that form and to imprint certain marks which are on it. There we have the explanation

of the brick, the full account of the antecedent conditions that produced it, its complete explanation in the terms of physical or efficient cause. Then comes along a Babylonian scholar, and he says to the scientist: "You are all right so far as you have gone. Only you have missed the target altogether. You have left out the essential thing. This brick was written by a king to convey to posterity the account of a victory." The scientist has given the efficient cause of the brick, the critic its final cause.

It is no easy problem to solve the relation between these two kinds of explanation. Here is the Brooklyn bridge. It is built strictly in accordance with the uniformity of nature's laws. Only by that uniformity does it stand. Every ounce of its material is supported by the physical conditions that surround it. The bridge is the inevitable result of the physical conditions that brought it forth. Given those conditions, no other result is conceivable. But the bridge was built to carry passengers from Brooklyn to New York and back again. It is the expression of that purpose carried out by human intelligence. Without that purpose and that intelligence no ounce of its material would stand where it does to-day. The bridge depends on the uniformity of nature's laws, and yet it would never have been the result of those laws unless they had been controlled by human intelligence and will.

The advance of science in the last century has been unparalleled. And that advance has been steadily in the discovery of the uniformity of the laws of nature. The reign of law, absolute, unyielding, rigid law, was the postulate, as it was the ever renewed discovery, of the scientific method. Yet through that uniformity man's control over nature grew apace and constantly produced results that were far from uniform. Man has subdued the powers of nature to his will. The face of the earth has been changed. Nature is under our control. In and through the deeper knowledge of efficient causes there has come the immensely greater opportunity for the display of final cause. Through the uniformity of nature we subject nature to our will.

Now in regard to these two sets of explanation we have a hard philosophical problem. How does mind, purpose, will, intelligence, come into relation with the uniform chain of physical

causes? How is it possible to maintain these two theses: first, that every physical event is the inevitable outcome of antecedent conditions; and, secondly, that intelligence and will can produce results that would not otherwise take place? I shall not attempt to deal with the various answers to this problem, whether from the point of view of materialism, of idealism, of mutual interaction, of mind-stuff, of pre-established harmony, or of concomitance. It is an unsolved problem. But this much is to be said. No solution can claim a hearing that leaves out the effect of the human will on the physical world. Man does subdue the face of the earth, and his past successes are but the prelude to mightier ones to come. No emphasis on the uniformity of law can lead us to disbelieve in the fact of human control of that uniformity. No reconciliation of the lion-and-lamb kind, in which the lamb of final cause lies down inside the lion of efficient cause, can be accepted. No philosophy is adequate that does not recognize the control of man over the physical world.

If all this be true, we have one element with which to approach the question of the supernatural. Natural science is exclusively occupied with the study of efficient causes, or, if you prefer, of regular uniformity, of natural law. Ever since Bacon it has been shy of final causes. Bacon said that in physics the investigation of final causes is like a consecrated virgin, it produces nothing. Physical science cannot use them, for they are not in its domain. Nevertheless, as soon as we begin the study of the phenomena in which man is concerned, then final causes enter in. The study of history may be a science, but it is not a natural science. Buckle's attempt is forever discredited. No one can explain history without taking into account the ideals, the aspirations, the intelligence, the will—in one word, the personality, of man.

If we accept the word "nature" as that which forms the subject of natural science, then we have in personality that which is in the strict sense super-natural. In the midst of physical conditions we have the guiding force of intelligence and will. The field of the supernatural is the field of personality, the field in which is manifest the activity of final causes.

If any one objects to this use of the word "supernatural," we

will not insist upon it. It is partly a matter of words. What I am concerned with is that we have a class of facts which demand a kind of interpretation with which physical science is not concerned, and it is by this interpretation that we are to approach the supernatural. It is a matter of terms as to whether we call human action supernatural. The real question of the supernatural is as to whether in and through the physical universe and the field of history there is active the force of intelligence and will other than that of man. Do final causes come from man alone? Or are there final causes which are the effect of a superhuman Being?

In this sense Bacon fully recognized the presence of final causes. But he assigned them to metaphysics and not to physics. "And I say this, not because those final causes are not true and worthy to be inquired in metaphysical speculations; but because their excursions and irruptions into the limits of physical causes has bred a waste and solitude in that track. For other wise, if they be but kept within their proper bounds, men are extremely deceived if they think there is any enmity or repugnancy at all between the two." (*De Augmentis Scientiarum*, Book iii, chap. iv.) According to Bacon, physical causes and final causes work together. Where the physicist sees the working of physical causes, the metaphysician may see the working of God. To trace the working of divine purpose in and through the physical world is the task not of physics, but of metaphysics.

It is also the task of religion. Herrmann has defined religion as the ability of a man to see in events the actions of a god. The definition may not be adequate as a definition of religion, but it is at any rate a description of that which belongs to the religious attitude. The religious man sees in nature and in history the action of God. He claims the right to interpret nature and history as the manifestation of a divine plan. He claims the right to apply the judgment of final cause to the whole field of his experience.

There are, then, two aspects under which the whole field of human experience may be regarded. It may be regarded as the resultant of previous conditions. That is the attitude of science. Or it may be regarded as the expression of divine intelligence and

will. That is the attitude of religion. It may be regarded as the result of efficient causes, it may be regarded as the working out of final cause or end. It may be looked upon as the result of natural forces, it may be looked at as the plan of a supernatural Being.

The difference between natural and supernatural is not therefore a difference in the field of experience. It is a difference in the attitude in which the whole field of experience is surveyed. It is all to be regarded as a natural product. It is all to be regarded as the expression of a supernatural plan.

The thought here presented admits of application to several different problems. And first to the somewhat worn theme of the relation between science and religion. The attempt is often made to reconcile the two by a division of the field. Certain classes of facts are assigned to science and certain other classes to religion. Such a division is not satisfactory and can never lead to a true reconciliation. It can at the best produce an armed truce. Science demands all the facts, and legitimately tries to reduce them to uniform sequence or law. Nothing can be held back from scientific investigation. But religion also demands all the facts, and claims the right to regard them all as the operation of God. No conflict is conceivable, for there is no division of the field. Each claims rightly the whole field, and each regards the whole field from its own point of view.

The position here maintained is similar to that of Bushnell in his great work, "Nature and the Supernatural." But there is one marked difference. While Bushnell considers the supernatural to be the personal, yet he never succeeds in overcoming the idea of an opposition between the personal and the physical. Thus he considers that, in order to find the supernatural presence of God, we must find the appearance from time to time of phenomena which cannot be accounted for by previous conditions, and which therefore reveal a new creative act of God. But that view leads to-day to an absolute antagonism with science, which will not allow any phenomenon to be outside the field of its investigation. Bushnell is excusable because he wrote before the modern view of evolution. "Nature and the Supernatural" was published in 1858, one year before the "Origin of the Species." But other more

modern writers offend in the same way with less excuse. Even Martineau seems to think that natural selection endangers teleology, and he looks for evidence of design in that which lies outside the reach of scientific explanation. The same half-hearted attitude prevails generally in Christian Apologetics. The last remnant of it ought to disappear. The scientific explanation is one thing, and has its rights everywhere. The religious explanation is another thing, and has its rights everywhere. Conflict arises only by a false and arbitrary division of the field. Each has the whole field, and the field is the world.

Objection may be made that the relation between these two modes of explanation is not clear. How can an event be at once the outcome of physical conditions and at the same time the expression of the divine will? The answer is that, if there be any difficulty, it is only the same difficulty that attends human action in its relation to the physical world. How is a house the result of natural law and at the same time the expression of intelligence and will? So long as the difficulty of answering this question does not prevent our belief that the house was made to live in, so long will the same difficulty not prevent us from seeing in nature the expression of the divine will. The theological interpretation is no harder than the anthropological.

Secondly, we may apply this conception to the idea of miracle. The religious man sees in all nature and all history the action of God. He looks at the universe and says, "Thou art a God that doest wonders." No dominance of natural law can prevent him from seeing the presence of divine action. So strong is his conviction that he will preserve it if necessary in the face of contradiction. If he is forced to believe that divine and physical action are opposed, then he will believe in the divine action all the same. In that case he will suppose that the laws of nature are occasionally set aside by the act of God. He will believe in miracles *contra naturam*. "Das Wunder ist des Glaubens liebstes Kind"—"Miracle is faith's dearest child." But a deeper insight will show that the sacrifice of reason was unnecessary. The opposition is a false one. Divine and physical action are not opposed. The miracle is the divine side of an event. It has been said that Saint Augustine's statement that everything is a miracle amounts

to saying that nothing is a miracle. But that does not do justice to Augustine's position. Augustine does not mean to confound the natural and the supernatural, to reduce the spiritual to the physical. In every event of nature he sees a divine side. And that divine side is the miracle. It is exceptional only to our knowledge. Augustine is right. To a deeper insight every event will be seen to have its divine side, its personal meaning, its place in the divine plan. We shall see in every event the working of God, without thereby supposing a disturbance of nature's laws. A man's house is a human miracle. It is that which nature alone could never produce. The universe is God's miracle. It is his house carrying out his plan. "For every house is builded by some one; but he that built all things is God."

Thirdly, we may apply this conception to the question of the transcendence and immanence of God. These terms are misleading. They are spatial. And spatial terms can never satisfactorily express spiritual realities. The result is confusion. The one term says that God is in the world and the other says that he is not. And we try to arrive at truth by a kind of compromise between the two contradictory statements, or by a union of both. Would that we could get rid of the terms altogether! As we cannot, we must translate them into terms of personality. Certainly no one wishes to think of God as apart from the universe, sitting on a distant throne. On the other hand, in trying to think of him as present in nature and history, we are too apt to identify him with naturalistic forces, and thus to make his presence not essentially different from that of nature itself. To escape the dilemma we must give up the spatial concept and introduce the spiritual. God is present in the same sense that a man is present to the material that he controls and by which he reveals his thoughts and purposes. Take the most trivial example. In a successful billiard stroke the player is present in the balls. His thought and purpose are manifested in the stroke. Yet that is true only because the player is superior to and in control of his material. The question is not one of distance. It is a matter of no importance how long the cue is, or where the player stands. Distance is annihilated when we deal with personal control. So the question of God's presence is the question of his control, and

of his character as manifested in that control. God is not identical with the physical laws of the universe. To conceive him as such would be to reduce his working to that of efficient causation, and thus to lose his personality. Rather, God is present in the universe in that the universe is his instrument and is carrying out his plan. He is present in no spatial sense. Yet the natural world if we could understand it, history if we could understand it, would tell us in all its parts of the divine plan, and would be the manifestation of the divine love. In no part of the world am I away from the immediate care and protection of our heavenly Father. "If I take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there also shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." "Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without your Father. Ye are of more value than many sparrows." That is an infinitely higher concept than any that has been expressed in spatial terms. It sums up in the terms of a personal relation that which the awkward terms of transcendence and immanence have been trying to express.

Fourthly, let us go back to the two sonnets with which we began. Arnold's sonnet expressed the hard, impersonal concept of physical law. This side has been strikingly put by Mulford in "The Republic of God": "There is in nature no strain of sympathy that breaks its indifference, no love interrupts its inexorable course. No appeal can stay its falling rocks. No entreaty can restrain its beating waves. It has no power to help man in his calamity. It does not turn to avert his injury, nor to mitigate his pain. The clown says to the old man in the storm—

‘Here’s a night that pities
Neither wise men nor fools.’

It is only in a figurative way that there is any declaration of a moral quality in the physical process. It is simply without the moral." And all that is true. Mere physical laws go on their way without regard to man. Nature is hard and cruel. "Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave." That is the account of nature looked at from the point of view of efficient causes, of physical laws. And yet the thought of Gilder's sonnet is true also. Nature can be looked at also from the point of view of

final cause. For we believe that in and through nature is manifested that which does "pass her." Here is the presence of a personal power. It is not the stars that save us. And yet the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. We can cry out to the very stars, "Touch and baptize me with the mighty power that in ye thrills," for that mighty power is the power of the personal God.

And that brings me to the last suggestion that I have to make as to the general view I have been presenting, and that is as to its bearing on the sense of the beauty of nature, on the appreciation of and love for the beauty of the physical world. The sense of the beauty of nature is so ingrained in us, is so much a part of our present culture, that we tend to think of it as an original possession of man. We take it for granted that man must have always felt the subtle charm of sea and mountain and forest. But it is greatly to be doubted if this is the case. It is far more probable that to primitive man nature was an object of dread rather than of love. The love of nature in our modern sense is a rather late product, and arises only with a fairly well-developed civilization. The history of art seems to show that the appreciation of nature comes after the appreciation of personality, and is indeed the product of a personal interpretation. In painting, the representation of nature remained subsidiary to that of the human form until a comparatively late date. The love of nature arises in and through the appreciation of humanity. To put the matter in the form of a one-sided aphorism, the love of the country is the product of the city. That is, as men enter into civilizing relations with each other, those relations by which personality comes to self-consciousness, by that process is developed the love for and appreciation of nature. Nature must be reached through personality or its message is not received. To love nature and to despise persons is to forget the rock from which we were hewn, the pit from which we were digged. Wordsworth, the greatest of all poets of nature, was also equally the poet of human life.

Now all this has a bearing on our main thesis. I have tried to show that the concept of the supernatural lies in the personal interpretation of nature. Nature itself knows only efficient cause,

only physical forces. Yet we believe that there is above nature a personal will that uses nature as a means of expression. Does it not follow that the deepest sense of the beauty and charm of nature must always see in it the revelation of personality? It is not matter that gives us the "cleansing bath" of beauty. It is matter interpreted in terms of final cause, matter the vehicle of spiritual impulse. The deepest sense of the beauty of nature will go hand in hand with the ability to let nature reveal the supernatural. It will therefore follow that the highest appreciation of nature comes through personality. Where personality gets its rights, there will nature convey her deepest message. The Christian concept of the personal God is a sounder basis for the love of nature than is the pantheistic identity that loses the very key to nature's deeper interpretation. He understands, and therefore loves, nature best who sees in nature the instrument and revelation of creative love. He sees in nature that which is above nature, "the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration, and the poet's dream." He sees in nature all its hardness and all its brutality, but he sees more. And though the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together, he sees in all that groaning and travailing the working of a divine purpose, the birth-pangs of a new creation, the coming of the Son of Man, the preparation for the

"One far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves."